

Service Learning, Non-traditional Students, and the Historic Black University: The Harris-Stowe Model

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Abstract

The university traditionally has had three roles: a) student instruction, b) pure research, and c) community service. While these roles have become disconnected in the contemporary university, they have remained integrated in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Due to budgetary constraints and constituent expectations, HBCU faculty and students have pursued these roles simultaneously. In recent years, the concept of “service learning” has been used by HBCUs to further integrate traditional university roles. Service learning involves student performance of course competencies in a community setting. This pedagogical approach has been beneficial for HBCUs because a) student projects aid the community, b) data from student projects may form the basis for faculty research, and c) service learning has shown promise as an effective form of instruction for non-traditional students who are a large contingent of HBCU students. This paper describes how service learning has been used at one HBCU—Harris-Stowe State University—to assume the roles of a university as it transitions from being a college to a university.

Introduction

Since the time of Thomas Aquinas, the role of the university has been three-fold: to instruct students, to expand knowledge, and to serve the community. These roles have not been conceived as being separate and distinct, but mutually reinforcing. Teaching, research, and service are meant to intertwine and reinforce one another. What makes a university education unique from that of a college is the expectation that students actively take part in research and apply that research in a worldly setting.

However, in the modern university, the connections between these traditional roles have become blurred. Students, faculty, and members of the community have become insular and isolated from one another. Students have come to view their education as something to be endured on their way to a job. Faculty see students and teaching as distractions from their real work as researchers. The community sees the university as a force that competes for resources rather than an asset.

There have been calls to put the university back together again. One initiative has been to stimulate undergraduate research. Another reform has called for a “community service” component in course requirements to push students to become involved in community affairs (e.g. Rhoads, 1997). Politicians, business leaders, community stakeholders all talk about the university as an engine to drive community and economic development. But there still has not emerged a coherent vision of how all three traditional roles of the university can be molded together in contemporary society.

Perhaps, though, it is the Historically Black University (HBU) that provides the best model of what the fusion of these traditional roles might look like. Because of the nature of its students, the research pursuits of its faculty, and the obligations that are imposed on it by its community, the HBU has been coerced to continue to treat the traditional roles of the university as one instead of three opposing tracts. The remainder of this paper will describe the experiences of one HBU—Harris-Stowe State University in St. Louis—as a case study of how one HBU and its students, faculty, and administration blend teaching, research, and service together.

Harris-Stowe and the Non-traditional Student

Harris-Stowe State University (HSSU) is a member of the Missouri state university system and is located in Midtown St. Louis. HSSU has an enrollment of 2,000 students and is the product of a merger of two predecessor institutions that was a response to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954. Both of the two predecessor institutions were teacher colleges that were operated by the St. Louis Board of Education. Harris was the teachers' college for white student teachers and Stowe was the teachers' college for black student teachers. The St. Louis Board of Education merged the two colleges immediately after the *Brown* decision was passed down. The merged institution, however, only kept the name of the white institution during the fifties and sixties. It was not until the seventies when the institution had become predominantly African-American was there pressure to hyphenate the name. In the late seventies, fiscal pressures, dropping enrollment and new academic expectations about teacher education led the Board of Education to hand over control of the institution to the state. At which time Harris-Stowe became part of the state university system.

The initial mission of HSSC (it was still a college at that time) was limited to elementary education. But in the early eighties, HSSC was able to expand its mission to include an Urban Education program that was designed to train non-classroom specialists who were intended to be problem-solvers in areas such as educational policy, research, fiscal management, and management information systems. It was also at this time that the institution was able to secure designation as an HBCU—a Historically Black College or University. In the early nineties, the college was able to expand its mission again. This time the state gave it the authorization to offer degrees in “applied professions.” HSSC quickly created degree programs in Criminal Justice, Business Admission, and modified the Urban Education program so that it became essentially a degree program in either Urban Studies or Public Administration. It was also in the mid-nineties that the college obtained a tract of property adjacent to it that was a failed subsidized housing project. Since that time, Harris-Stowe has built several buildings on its enlarged campus.

During the last year, Harris-Stowe expanded its mission again. In 2005, the state changed the institution's status from a college to a university. The change in status has forced the college to re-examine its mission especially in terms of its role in research and community service. Not content to be a university in name only, HSSU has begun a strategic planning process that is intended to generate strategies on how it can best assume its new responsibilities.

But in large part, Harris-Stowe's status as a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) has already dictated in what directions this mission expansion will

take the new university. As an HBCU—especially one in a distressed urban area—it has been forced to accept its obligations as a major stakeholder in the African-American community. Even while it was a teachers' college, the African-American community expected the college to assume all of the roles of a university because if it did not, no other institution would. By making Harris-Stowe a university, the state has merely institutionalized roles that the college had already assumed—teaching, researching, and performing community service—to address needs of the St. Louis African-American community.

One need that this community has, which it shares with many other urban African-American communities, is to make higher education accessible in terms both money and time to non-traditional students. The median age of HSSU students is 29. Most students have full time jobs. Many students have families. Many students with families head one parent households. For HSSU students, higher education must not only be affordable, but time efficient. Many HSSU students, however, come with poor academic backgrounds that would make it difficult for them to succeed academically even if they were traditional students that did not face the obstacles confronting these students.

For Harris-Stowe, the backgrounds of its students is both a challenge and an opportunity to make the institution a “new sort of thing” that recaptures the traditional essence of what a university is supposed to be—a fusion of teaching, research, and service. An approach that other HBUs have utilized in fulfilling their roles as a university and addressing the particular academic needs of their students has been service learning. Service learning has been shown to be both a means that HBUs can incorporate instruction and research with community service and as a way of accelerating the remediation process of academic deficient students (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2001). The age of HSSU students, their employment backgrounds, and their educational deficiencies all make Harris-Stowe not just an institution where service-learning might be an alternative instructional strategy, but the foundation of what Harris-Stowe can become in terms of being a university.

What is service learning?

While service learning as a pedagogical technique has been discussed since the early nineties, there has been a tremendous amount of confusion about just what that term implies (Astin, Ikelda, Vogelgesang, & Yee, 2000). For many academics, service learning is just another word for community service or the practice of having students volunteer service to the community which may or may not pertain to course work. The main objective with community service is to impress upon students their responsibility to take ownership for the community. However, true service learning needs to be course based. Instead of consisting of volunteer activities, service learning entails course requirements designed to meet course objectives or competencies. The purpose of service learning then is not just to provide service to the community, but that it leads to mastery of course content.

Service learning lends itself well to students at Harris-Stowe because it takes their backgrounds as strengths rather than as weaknesses. In a service learning environment, their age, their maturity, their work experiences allow HSSU students to undertake real projects with real consequences. In a sense, their learning is accelerated because they are

forced to apply what they know—and learn what they do not—to complete their projects. Because the projects often take place in the very community in which they live, students see very clearly the importance of the theory and skills they learn in the classroom and in their reading.

Where service learning is fully integrated in the curriculum, it has ramifications for research. Service learning projects become not only a means of instructing students in content, but a means of generating data. For example, in an urban problems class, students can be taught how to conduct a building conditions survey to generate the data for a longitudinal study on how particular neighborhoods change over time. Armed with data, residents and neighborhood leaders in a community can design strategies to effectively address community problems.

Harris-Stowe and the Lucas Heights Partnership

An interdepartmental group of Harris-Stowe faculty began experimenting with how service learning might address student deficiencies and help Harris-Stowe become more involved in research and service to the community in the late nineties. Initially, it began slowly with faculty in the Business Administration and Urban Specializations departments incorporating service-learning components into their classes.

Business administration faculty made assignments that required their students to apply concepts learned in the classroom to community setting. Courses in entrepreneurship, required students to assist potential entrepreneurs in low-income communities prepare business plans. After exposing the students to the basic elements of a business plan, the instructor oversaw student work with the community entrepreneurs. Instead of lecturing every class period, some class periods were devoted to working with “clients.” Just as on the job, students were forced to acquire information and skills needed to complete the project.

It quickly became apparent to the participating faculty that the students were not the only beneficiaries of the experiment. The community was indebted to the instructors and Harris-Stowe for facilitating economic stimulation. Moreover, the faculty benefited as the students generated a great deal of data to examine a number of interesting questions.

After the initial success with service learning, a group of faculty started a research center at Harris-Stowe based on service learning, called the Center for Neighborhood Affairs (CFNA). The first major project of CFNA was a collaborative effort with residents and stakeholders in Lucas Heights—a distressed neighborhood adjacent to the University to pair the resources and expertise of the University to address the needs and concerns of the community. To support the partnership, CFNA received a grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. This grant funded three major activities. One activity created a homeowner improvement fund. Students helped track how the funds were used and their impact. The second activity assisted a settlement house in the neighborhood to help preteens start their own businesses. Teams of youth paired with Harris-Stowe business majors and developed a business concept, wrote a business plan, bought supplies, and produced a product. The third activity involved students in the Urban Specializations department working with staff of the city planning department, community leaders, and neighborhood residents develop a long-term strategic plan for the community.

The funded activities have been completed successfully, but Harris-Stowe faculty and students have continued to work in the neighborhood. At present, they are conducting two evaluations. One is for the St. Louis Housing Authority where faculty and students assess the redevelopment of a large public housing project. The other is of an innovative faith-based after school program. Another initiative under consideration is assisting local entrepreneurs start a new business district. Also, students and faculty are involved in a “community service project” where members of the HSSU family help seniors at a senior apartment complex maintain their community garden.

Challenges

Of course there have been challenges in incorporating service learning as the foundation for Harris-Stowe’s mission as a university. These challenges include students and faculty.

Student work schedules. HSSU students are older and have full time jobs. Since many students are in various service fields, they often have evening and weekend hours. As a result, it is very difficult to schedule an out-of-class field experience. Faculty have overcome this dilemma by either using class time or by offering a number of time options.

Student academic deficiencies. As with many public HBCUs in a major metropolis, many Harris-Stowe students come to the university with severe academic deficiencies. Writing skills are generally poor. Mathematics preparation is weak. Computer knowledge is usually limited to word processing. In many cases, service learning helps students to self-mediate their shortcomings at a faster rate than in traditional classroom setting. They are forced to “polish” their writing knowing that it will read by outside readers. They can more readily visualize why certain statistics are used when applying them to a real situation. They can pick up a certain computer skill “on the fly” to deal with an actual problem. However, when students are not able to overcome their deficiencies, they many need “one-on-one” attention. But even here, service learning is beneficial because it helps the instructor and the student to pinpoint accurately and quickly where the student needs help.

Faculty resistance. As with faculty everywhere, many HSSU faculty have resisted service learning. Hopefully, more extensive assessment of service learning will lessen this resistance.

Next Steps

Over the course of the next year, there will be a number of initiatives involving service learning at HSSU.

Evaluation process. Service learning has been a part of HSSU teaching, research, and community service efforts for ten years. Faculty members are devising an evaluation process that will assess the impact of the model on the university.

Strategic Plan. Last year, the university started work on a new strategic plan as part of Harris-Stowe’s self-assessment on becoming a university. Several faculty are advocating strongly that student learning become the focus of the plan.

Course expansion. Service learning has been adopted primarily by faculty in the social sciences and business. These faculty will work with faculty in the humanities, sciences, and education to incorporate service learning into their curricula.

Conclusion

In conclusion, service learning, and the initiatives specific to Harris-Stowe where service learning is concerned, suggests a strategy for fusing together the traditional roles of a university. Not only is it an effective teaching strategy, it is a useful approach for involving undergraduates in faculty research and university involvement in the community. Because Harris-Stowe is a new university, it has an opportunity to re-examine its mission as a university and how service learning can define that mission.

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